APPENDIX A

CONDUCTING COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENTS

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The needs of a community are not static nor fixed over time. They, like the community itself, are dynamic and ever–changing. Residents are born, die, move, and age. Policies and programs that were once appropriate may no longer serve the needs of the people. The demands of a rapidly growing community can seem overwhelming to a small town government with limited resources, like many found in Montana. A Community Needs Assessment can determine the current needs of the community. In addition, not only will the Community Needs Assessment identify those needs, but will assist in prioritizing them.

The Community Needs Assessment process is the foundation upon which further community planning can be developed. The quality of the process and hence, the information which it generates are vital in helping a community develop strategies for funding community projects and compete for grant funds.

Why conduct a Community Needs Assessment?

- To determine the **current needs** of the community;
- To assist in **prioritizing** those needs;
- To elicit **citizen opinion**;
- To provide a foundation for **funding applications**.

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT TECHNIQUES

There are several techniques that can be used to assess community needs. Some techniques may be more useful to a particular community than others. Below is a summary of several useful techniques. A combination of methods may yield the most information about your community. Remember, a needs assessment is only as good as the techniques used to gain the information.

1. Existing Information Method:

U.S. Bureau of Census information – Census information is collected and compiled every ten years. Statistics describing population size, distribution, composition, fertility, mortality and migration are given for each state. General social, economic and other descriptive information is also available. Census statistics are excellent sources of demographic information. They can be used to identify population changes and, possibly, to anticipate trends in population growth or decline. The information may then be used as a standard of comparison between one community and another, or to examine whether a particular community is following a national or state trend.

For information contact:
Census and Economic Information Center
Montana Department of Commerce
444–4393

Montana State Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) – The Montana Department of Commerce publishes a yearly CHAS as required by the 1990 National Affordable Housing Act. This publication summarizes population information and is an excellent compilation of Montana's housing needs. The document contains several tables with housing information specific to counties and towns in Montana.

For information contact:
CHAS Coordinator
Montana Department of Commerce
444–0092

2. Key Source Method:

This method is based on gaining information through interviews, over time, from community residents who are in a position to know the community well. Appropriate sources include public officials, longtime residents, business managers, and/or church leaders. The sources should represent a variety of lifestyles, ages and viewpoints. This method is especially useful when working in a community with cultural differences or minority groups. The Key Source Method requires sufficient time to develop trusting relationships with all the participants.

3. Community Forum Method:

This method is based on gathering information through one or more public meetings during which residents may express their opinions about community problems and needs. This technique helps build public awareness, legitimizes the need for further studies, and tests public opinion of proposed projects. Keep in mind that not all community residents are represented with this method. Information is only gathered from those individuals attending the meetings and may not be an adequate representation of the entire community. For example, special needs households, i.e. low and moderate income, elderly, handicapped, minority, may feel intimidated by attending or discussing their needs in public.

4. Survey Method:

This is the only needs assessment method that has the potential of representing every citizen in the community. A questionnaire or interview may be completed by each household (or individual) in the survey area or by a random sample taken of individuals selected from the survey area. The survey method offers flexibility in the types of questions that can be asked, and it can be tailored to a specific community. The survey method may, however, require more time than other methods. The following pages explain the survey method in more detail.

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A combination of the aforementioned methods will provide the most information. The survey method should, however, be the "cornerstone" of your needs assessment. Other methods may be used to augment the information gained from the survey and may provide additional insight into underlying public sentiment. It is often useful to review census information before developing your survey, in order to identify demographic patterns that may be emerging.

The order in which you apply the needs assessment techniques may vary. However, a community forum held **before** the survey notifies citizens of the survey and may stimulate a better response.

CENSUS INFORMATION

↓

COMMUNITY FORUM

↓

SURVEY

↓

KEY SOURCES

THE COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY

A Community Needs Assessment Survey provides a good basis for determining your community's needs. This method requires not only time, but planning and thought. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the survey method as part of the overall needs assessment process.

"Planning will make the process go smoothly!"

TO CONDUCT A COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT, FOLLOW THESE STEPS:

STEP 1 – Appoint a Citizen Task Force

STEP 2 – Write the survey

STEP 3 – Distribute the survey

STEP 4 – Analyze and present the results

STEP 1: APPOINT A TASK FORCE

A Task Force, comprised of community members interested in improving their community, is necessary for a successful needs assessment survey. Members of the Task Force should be willing to devote time and energy to the process.

Members of the Task Force, which can be named the Citizens Advisory Committee, should represent diverse community groups and should include representatives from churches, senior citizens, business groups, the school district, the Chamber of Commerce, ethnic groups and civic groups. Every community group should be invited to send a member to serve on the Task Force. Valuable input can also be obtained from local real estate agents, landlords, the City Clerk, Mayor and public works director. You may end up with a lengthy invitation list, but not all of those invited will wish to serve on the Task Force. The important point is to provide anyone interested with the option of participating. Try not to exclude any factions or special interest groups. Failure to include all the "players" could have a negative impact on the process.

In general, a committee of five to ten members is usually manageable. However, if productive meetings can be conducted with more members, the additional input is often helpful. If few attend the first meeting, don't worry – you can still accomplish your goals. Invite specific groups or individuals to attend meetings at which they may be able to contribute valuable information. For instance, invite real estate agents and landlords to attend meetings at which housing needs will be discussed. Similarly, invite the public works director to attend a meeting on water and sewer system needs. Individuals with a particular area of expertise may be more inclined to attend a meeting related to their area of special knowledge.

The first meeting should be organizational in nature. Discuss the survey process and organize meeting times and places that are convenient for members. Noon meetings are often preferred by working members. One option is to meet at area restaurants, on a rotation basis. The visibility helps to generate public interest in what the Task Force is doing.

At the first meeting, elect a chairman, a vice–chairman and a secretary. The chairman and secretary should be the two members who are most familiar with the needs assessment survey process. The secretary will record the minutes of all meetings, write agendas, and inform members of meeting times and places. The chairman follows an agenda and keeps the meeting orderly. The vice–chairman will preside over the meeting in the chairman's absence.

The Task Force should create a time–line that includes completion dates. Bimonthly meetings should provide enough time for the Task Force to distribute the survey within six to eight months of the first meeting.

After the Task Force has been organized, take the list of members to the next City Council meeting and have them officially appointed to the Task Force. This will lend credibility to the entire procedure.

INFORMING THE PUBLIC

It is very important to keep the public informed during the survey and community planning process. There is a loss of public trust when people are not kept fully informed. The key to a successful survey is to get the community involved from the onset. A good way to do this is through the press. Prepare periodic press releases for your local newspaper during the course of the survey and/or invite the local newspaper reporter to serve on or attend the Task Force meetings.

A public hearing should also be held before the surveys are distributed. This is a standard and accepted method of informing the community. The needs assessment survey process should be explained at this time. This is a good time to emphasize the importance of the survey, and encourage people to complete and return their surveys promptly.

NOW IT'S TIME TO GET TO WORK!

STEP 2: WRITING THE SURVEY

The survey form is actually developed and designed at the Task Force meetings. The Task Force will discuss and review potential survey questions, and adjust them to meet the specific needs of the community. The Needs Assessment Survey should be designed to gather information regarding: demographics; housing; public facilities; economic development; and income. (Exhibit A, at the end of this chapter contains a sample Needs Assessment Survey.) The committee should discuss and complete each section of the survey before moving on to the next. The secretary will prepare the selected survey questions after each meeting, and distribute them (and the meeting minutes) to each Task Force member for review before the next meeting. All survey questions should be pre–tested by asking different individuals to fill out the form and point out items that need clarification.

Each Task Force member should receive a copy of the sample survey provided at the end of this chapter. Use this sample survey as a guide in developing a unique survey, geared toward your community. While many of the questions you want to ask may be similar, try to keep in mind the specific needs of your town.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The purpose of this section is to describe and identify characteristics of respondents to your survey. If the number of responses received is high enough to render the survey results statistically valid, you can assume the characteristics of the respondents parallel the population characteristics within the community.

This section of the survey will also help identify "special needs" households in the community, such as handicapped, elderly, minority and single parent households. Include questions on age, sex, marital, minority, and handicapped status, and education. Financial status is also an important demographic question.

Due to the sensitive nature of the income level questions, they should be placed at the end of the survey. By then the respondent usually has developed a level of comfort with the survey and is more likely to answer income level questions.

It is important to know who the respondents to your survey are to assist in defining any **survey bias** that may exist. Typical response differences may occur according to gender or age of the respondents. Education level and financial status may also affect responses. For instance, senior citizens may have more time to complete the survey. Therefore, your results might show a large senior population, when in fact your community's population may possess a fairly even age distribution. Respondent characteristics that can form a bias can impact the survey result in other areas. Using this example, your results may show an extremely high need for a Senior Citizen Center, and a low need for daycare facilities, when in fact both types of facilities may be needed. You will need to identify any potential survey bias in reporting your survey results.

HOUSING

In this section of the survey you should attempt to define the housing needs of the community. Include questions on rental housing, elderly housing, condition of existing units, first–time homebuyer needs,tenant–based rental assistance needs and owner occupied units.

Include questions specific to your community. If your community is tourism–oriented, you may wish to determine if people reside in their homes year–round, or seasonally. If you have a large elderly population, include questions regarding nursing homes, personal care facilities and handicapped housing.

Information gathered in this section will help form the foundation of a Housing Plan for your community. Demonstrating a particular need in the housing category may help you obtain future grant funding for housing programs.

For example, an important question to ask, if you are considering a housing rehabilitation program, is as follows; "If, as a homeowner, you were eligible for low–interest loans or grants to improve your house, would you apply for such assistance?" If the resulting response indicates a large number of homeowners are interested in housing rehabilitation, the information can assist local leaders in determining the size of a possible rehabilitation project to be structured and may identify an area of the community to be targeted for the project.

PUBLIC FACILITIES

The public facilities category covers a wide range of community issues – everything from sidewalks to sewers. This will probably be the longest section of your survey. The results of this section will assist in defining the condition of, or lack of, current facilities.

Design these questions to reflect public opinion of specific public facilities. Include separate questions on solid waste, recycling programs, emergency services, childcare, senior citizen services, and schools. Do not forget to include questions on infrastructure; your public water and sewer systems, and streets. It may be pertinent to determine the water/sewer service condition within each respondent's home, or from the street to the home.

The information gathered may be utilized in the preparation of a Capital Improvements Plan or Public Facilities Plan for your community. To assist your City Council in assessing community support for public facilities projects, include the following questions:

> "Would you support using local funds or resources (equipment, manpower) to make improvements or expand the public facilities or services?"; and
>
> "Would you be in favor of seeking state or federal funds to make improvements or to expand the public facilities or services?"

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

In the economic development section of your survey, you will need to define the work force in your community. Determine both the occupations of the residents, and the current employment status of each individual. A question may also be included on future occupational plans of respondents which may make job projections more realistic. Include a question concerning distance and travel time to work to identify commuters. You may wish to ask what community the commuters work in. In this manner, it is possible to determine if more jobs are needed, and if so, what types of jobs. By promoting the right types of economic development, you will be able to retain jobs in your community and increase the dollars spent locally.

Identify the types of economic development that would be supported by the community. For example, do citizens favor heavy manufacturing businesses, or would they prefer an increase in financial support for the promotion of tourism?

The following questions should be included to determine the degree of interest and level of community support for implementing economic development projects:

> "Would you support using local funds or resources (equipment, manpower) to develop or expand businesses creating job opportunities in *Yourtown* or on a county-wide basis?"; and

> "Do you favor seeking state or federal funds to make improvements or to develop or expand businesses in an attempt to create job opportunities?"

At the end of the first four sections (demographics, housing, public facilities and economic development), include two "fill-in" type questions. Ask your respondents to identify the greatest needs and assets in their community. This allows respondents to express their own opinions. They may even identify a potential need that the Task Force did not find.

INCOME

These may be the most important questions on your survey. Many grant funding sources require you to determine the percentage of low to moderate income (LMI) households in your community or project area. The ***current* HUD Income Limits for Determining Low and Moderate Income Status** must be used (refer to Exhibit B at the end of this chapter). These guidelines are available from the Montana Department of Commerce. The guidelines are presented in tabular form, listing Montana counties and giving the low and moderate income levels by family size. The guidelines are updated annually, so remember to obtain the most current guidelines.

Refer to Exhibit A for an example of an income question. It will be necessary to explain the purpose of this question and assure respondents that their responses will remain confidential.

People are sensitive about issues regarding their income. Informing respondents of the purpose of this question may ease their sensitivity, and hopefully, increase the response rate to this question.

This question should be organized in categories based on family size, from one to eight person households. Within each family size category, the corresponding low and moderate income limits will be listed in the following manner:

There are **5 people** in my household and the total household income is:
____ above $27,200
____ below $27,200
____ below $17,000

The respondent will be asked to check the appropriate space in the statement, which represents the income of the total number of people in the household. In this manner, the income distribution of the community can be determined, without requesting the exact income figures. Not only will this method make the respondent more comfortable, but your survey will be easier to tabulate.

At the end of the question, again, assure the respondents that the information is important and confidential. The last sentence of the survey should thank the respondent for their time, and remind them that their opinions are important to the community.

SURVEY FORMAT

As you develop your survey questions, remember to keep the respondent in mind. Keep the survey as simple as possible. The less intimidating the survey, the more questions the respondent will be likely to answer. Furthermore, the actual format of the question, the response categories, and the way the respondents enter answers will have a great effect on whether they take the time to fill out and return the survey.

Another consideration in survey format is ease of tabulation. It is much easier to tabulate a multiple choice questionnaire than a fill-in type. However, include some essay or fill-in type questions to allow respondents to express their own specific opinions.

Some general guidelines to follow:

- The survey should be as brief as possible. Do not omit important questions, but be concise. Do not leave excess space between questions.

- Be sure your print is legible. Use a simple font, in an average size.

- List multiple responses under the question. Example:

  Marital Status:

  [] single
  [] married
  [] divorced
  [] widow/widower
  [] cohabitor

  If space is a consideration, format the survey itself into columns. If the categories are spread across the page, the respondent is more likely to choose the first category that applies to them and move on to the next question than if all categories are directly beneath each other. Placing all responses in a column has the added advantage of making the survey more organized.

- If you want just one response per question, make sure the response categories are mutually exclusive, i.e. don't overlap. For instance, in the above example, instead of "single", put "single, never married".

- If you want several responses to a question, notify the respondent by adding "please check **all** responses that apply". If not, add the wording, "please check only one response."

- If there is something important that the respondent needs to read in order to properly answer the question, bold, underline or capitalize it.

- Always add an "other" category in order to cover all possible responses. For example, you may add the following to the listed response options:

  [] single, never married
  [] divorced
  [] other, please specify _______________

- It is recommended that you do not include a "no opinion" category. This option is often the easiest for the respondent to select, and may discourage the respondent to fully consider the question.

- Put the response line or box to the left of the response category. Boxes, □, are the best for responses, because they keep the respondent from accidentally checking the wrong category. If your word-processor does not have this capability, a set of brackets, [], is a common alternative.

You may wish respondents to rate their answers. Example:

Do you feel Anytown needs additional **rental** properties? (Please circle your response to each of the following categories:)

	strongly disagree←———————→stronglyagree									
apartments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
rental houses	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
low income units	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

This method is subjective, one person's definition of "strongly" may not be the same as the next. Although the "yes or no" format is generally easier during the tabulation and/or computerization of results, the rating method may be necessary under certain circumstances.

THE COVER LETTER

A cover letter, signed by the community's chief elected official should be attached to the front of the survey (refer to Exhibit A). This letter should begin with a sentence or two to capture the readers' attention, to get them interested in the letter. The letter should explain the purpose of the survey and who is conducting it. Let the reader know that they can have a say in the future of the community by making their voice heard.

Include in the letter the dates that the surveys are being distributed; the return deadlines; and instructions on where or how the survey should be returned.

THE "INCENTIVE"

When you are surveying a community, the more responses you receive, the better. A minimum number of survey returns is actually required by the Community Development Block Grant Program when conducting an income survey (please refer to the **SAMPLE SIZE** section on page 13). To encourage a large percentage of survey returns, an incentive may be offered.

An excellent incentive is a **prize drawing**. A Task Force member should canvass local businesses for donations to the Needs Assessment Survey. Explain to each business the needs assessment survey and prize drawing processes. These funds may be awarded as "Anytown Bucks" to be spent at local businesses only. Returned surveys will be pooled, and a lottery–type drawing is conducted at the conclusion of the survey process.

Prize drawing tickets should be included with the survey (refer to Exhibit A, page 7). The respondent keeps one ticket and returns the other with the completed survey. Only **completed** surveys will be eligible to win. Describe this process in your cover letter. Tell the respondent that they must return their survey by a specific date in order to be eligible. Ask the Chamber of Commerce to hold the drawing upon completion of the survey process. Be sure to invite the local newspaper reporter.

STEP 3: SAMPLE SELECTION and SURVEY DISTRIBUTION

SAMPLE SIZE

When making the decision regarding who should receive your survey forms, it is important to understand three concepts: population, sample, and response rate. Population refers to the entire group of people you wish to gather information about, e.g. your town, city, county, or a specific neighborhood within the city.

If the population of interest to you is small enough, you should attempt to administer a survey to every household. A community with 2,000 households may be too costly and time consuming to survey the entire population. A random sample of the population may be surveyed and act as a representative sample of the community. This sample must be a cross section of the entire community and selected in a truly random fashion (i.e. each person in the population has an equal chance of being selected for inclusion in the sample).

The sample size varies with the size of the total population (total number of households). There are many formulas for determining a statistically valid sample size. The Montana Department of Commerce recommends the following calculation, which is accepted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

$$\text{Sample size} = \frac{.25}{.000625 + \dfrac{.25}{\text{population size}}}$$

In the formula the **population size equals the total number of occupied households** in the town, city, or county. This number can be derived by blending information from the most recent census data with local utility listings. Be sure to consider multi-unit rentals that may be reflected as "one" unit on utility listings.

The **sample size** calculated in the formula is the number of responses needed for a statistically valid response. Montana Department of Commerce requires the minimum sample size for the income survey be calculated according to this formula. Scientifically, a 50% response rate is considered fair and a 70% response rate is excellent. You should make every effort to receive at least a 60% response rate.

MAPPING

If you are considering utilizing the Needs Assessment Survey results as a basis to structure community development projects that "target" specific areas within the community or specific groups within the community, you may wish to code your surveys.

Coding simply allows you to cross reference results with specific households or areas in the community. If the results are computerized, the computer can be asked to query all the surveys that have a certain response to a specific question. For example, if you have included the question: "If, as a homeowner, you were eligible for low-interest loans or grants to improve your house, would you apply for assistance?", the computer will identify all the survey numbers that had a positive response. Further, you can ask the computer to query those numbers to identify which respondents to that question are low or moderate income.

In a CDBG housing rehabilitation application, it is helpful to know which Needs Assessment Survey originated in which housing unit. It is not essential to know the occupant's name, but you must be able to connect the income and the demographic characteristics of the household with the condition and location of the unit.

In order to accomplish this, you will need a plat map of your town or survey area. Plat maps can be obtained at your town hall or county courthouse. Assign a number to each housing unit on the map (beginning with 101). Number your surveys with the same sequence of numbers. Divide your plat map into sections of twenty to fifty units. Each volunteer will be given a section of the plat map and the corresponding numbered surveys. Be sure to explain to the volunteer the importance of taking each survey to the corresponding housing unit. Give your volunteers some un-numbered surveys. If some of the units are rentals with more than one unit per building, you can alphabetize one number. For example, 101A, 101B, 101C, etc.

If you are surveying a large community or a county with more than 1000 households it may be unfeasible to number code each survey to a corresponding housing unit. Another method of coding entails the inclusion of one or more questions on the survey form that request information regarding the location of the respondents residence. A sample survey question is cited below:

92. Please refer to the map below, and check the following statement which applies to the location of your home:

    ____ Outside of Laurel City limits
    ____ Ward 1, City of Laurel
    ____ Ward 2, City of Laurel
    ____ Ward 3, City of Laurel
    ____ Ward 4, City of Laurel

DISTRIBUTION

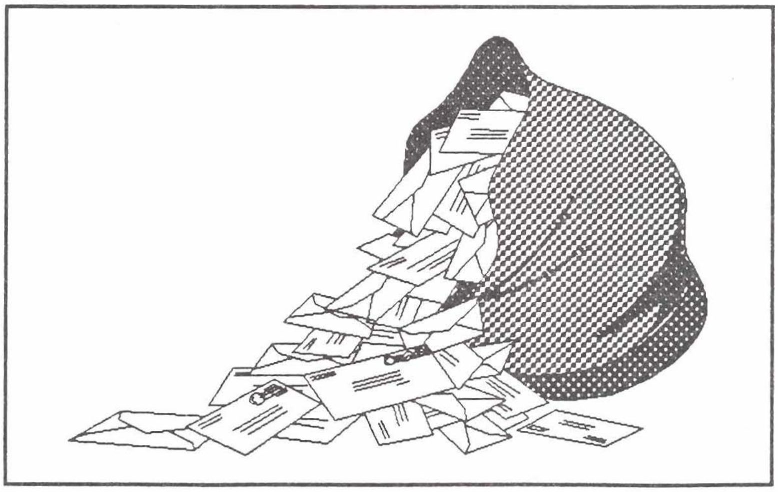
Several survey distribution methods exist. Two recommended methods, mailed and door-to-door, are described below. Consider both methods and then decide which may be the best for your community.

MAILING – Surveys can be direct mailed to households in your survey area. If you are surveying a larger community (over 1,000 households), this may be a time-saving alternative. However, a complete mailing list is often difficult to obtain. You may try the list of taxpayers form the county assessor's office, or the water-user list from the city clerk. These lists may not contain renters' names, and the lists may have to be augmented. This method does not allow you to identify which housing unit the survey respondent resides in, which is important in housing rehabilitation grant applications. If you wish respondents to return their surveys by mail, enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

DOOR TO DOOR – When surveying small communities (under 1,000 households), the door to door method is the best. You will need ten to fifteen volunteers. The volunteers will take the surveys door to door, to every household in the survey area. The surveys may be left with the occupant to return by mail; or the volunteer may assist the occupant in filling out the survey, collect the survey, and return it by hand.

Another option is **drop off boxes**. This method of returning surveys may be used with the mail or the door to door methods of distribution. Several boxes that are clearly labeled "**SURVEY RETURNS, ANYTOWN NEEDS ASSESSMENT SURVEY**" are left at area businesses, the town hall, or the library. Cut a slot in the top of the box and secure the lid. In this manner, respondents can drop off their surveys without having to mail them. Be sure to assign a member of the Task Force to empty the boxes daily.

You may use any combination of the above methods. For instance, you could distribute the surveys by mail, and then give respondents the option of returning them by mail or using drop off boxes.



STEP 4: ANALYZING AND PRESENTING YOUR RESULTS

TABULATION

After all the surveys have been returned, the results need to be tabulated. The best way to do this is to load the answers into a database such as Dbase III. There is a major advantage in using a database. Once the surveys have been loaded, it is possible to cross–reference responses to multiple questions. For instance, it is possible to determine how many elderly households expressed a need for elderly housing.

The surveys can also be tabulated by hand. This method is far more time consuming, but may be acceptable given small survey samples.

STATEMENT OF OBSERVATIONS

As a preface to your survey result, you will need to draft a **Statement of Observations,** or a written summary of the survey process. (Please refer to Exhibit B.) This document should include the following items:

- Delineate the survey area – for instance, the jurisdictional boundaries of the town.
- State the objective of the survey – for instance, to compile useable information about the community in order to facilitate the planning of municipal and private development projects.
- Define any survey bias that may be present – typical response biases can be observed by gender, age, and income of the respondents. Education level and financial status may also bias responses and their effects should be examined.
- Summarize the survey development process including a description of the Task Force.
- Explain the purpose of each category of questions on the survey form.

PRESENTING YOUR RESULTS

The final step in the Community Needs Assessment Survey process is the presentation of the results. Your goal should be to present the survey results as clearly as possible.

Each question should be recited in the results using the same format as the actual survey. Include the number of responses to each question and the number of respondents to each answer. For each question, you can then determine the percentage of respondents to each possible response category. Preface the results by explaining how the data is presented. For example:

The data below shows the number of respondents to each survey question in **bold**. It also shows the percentage of respondents to each answer, and in parentheses, the number of respondents to each answer.

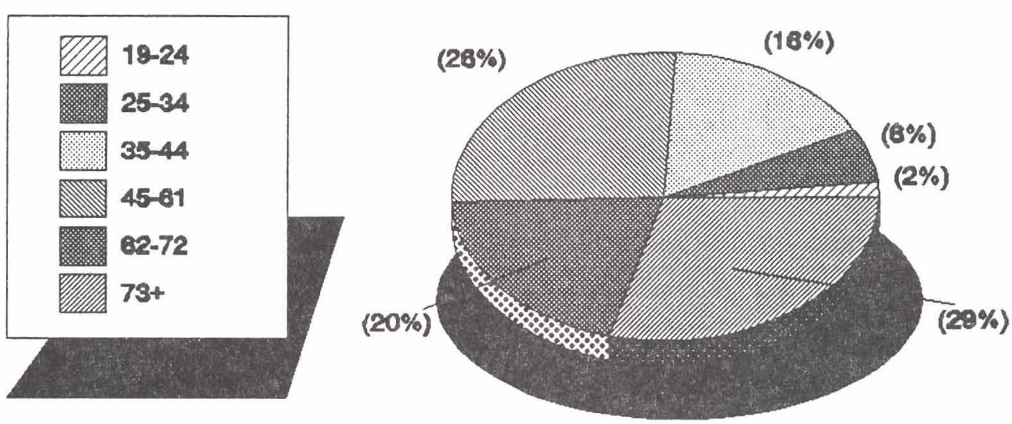
1. Your age: **227 respondents**

 1.8% (4) 19–24 years of age
 6.2% (14) 25–34 years of age
16.3% (37) 35–44 years of age
26.4% (60) 45–61 years of age
20.3% (46) 62–72 years of age
29.1% (66) 73 years of age and over

You may wish to present graphs or charts depicting your results. For instance:

Age Distribution

227 Total Sample



RESPONDENTS

Once the results have been prepared in written form, it is necessary to inform the public. You may wish to prepare a press release and/or provide your local newspaper reporter with a copy of the survey results. This is a good time to schedule another public hearing to present the results. You may also wish to attend community group meetings, such as the Senior Citizens Club or the Chamber of Commerce to discuss the survey results.

References:

The Community Development Needs Assessment Process
The Montana Department of Commerce
Community Development Block Grant Program
August 1991

Coping with Growth
Lorna Michael Butler and
Robert E. Howell
Washington State University
October 1980